TECHNICAL TRANSACTIONS | CZASOPISMO TECHNICZNE
ARCHITECTURE | ARCHITEKTURA
9-A/2015

ANNA SZCZEGIELNIAK*

"WHY SO SERIOUS?" – THE JOKE AS A MEANS OF EXPRESSION IN ARCHITECTURE

„WHY SO SERIOUS?" – ŻART JAKO ŚRODEK WYRAZU W ARCHITEKTURZE

A b s t r a c t

The paper presents the joke as a means of expression used in architecture. The author debates whether the architecture should always be serious. The paper describes and gives historical and contemporary examples of how the comical effect is achieved in architecture. The paper is also an attempt to explain and understand what the jokes in architecture are used for.

Keywords: architecture, joke, humour, mannerist architecture, postmodern architecture, contemporary architecture

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł podejmuje temat żartu jako środka wyrazu używanego przez architektów. Autorka zastanawia się czy architektura musi być zawsze serio. W tekście opisano na przykładach obiektów współczesnych i historycznych, w jaki sposób uzyskiwany jest efekt komiczny w architekturze. Artykuł to również próba wyjaśnienia do czego może służyć żart w architekturze i kiedy jest przydatny.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, żart, humor, manieryzm, postmodernizm, architektura współczesna

* M.Sc. Arch. Anna Szczegielniak, Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Opole University of Technology.

"You can judge how bad the seventies were by looking at its uptight architecture." [6]

1. Introduction

Does architecture need to be serious and do we need to treat it seriously? Humorous and funny architectural motifs can be found in many buildings, both contemporary and historical. The comical effect can be achieved by different means, depending on when and where the building was designed and what the aim of the architect was. The ways of achieving a humorous effect can be divided into groups of buildings in which the result was achieved in a similar way.

2. How to be funny?

One of the ways to create an amusing effect in architecture is contrast. The contrast can appear in many different ways. It can be a contrast between the material and the form or function of the building. This solution can be found very often in the works of MVRDV. The Balancing Barn is playing with the traditional barn form, which was covered in shiny metal panels. On the other hand, in the Glass Farm project, a traditional Dutch hut is made entirely out of glass with printed brick and roof tiles pattern. A different example are the houses called 'Kubuswoningen' (the project of Piet Blom, designed in 1977, built in 1984 in Rotterdam) (Ill. 1) and similar Bolwoningen (design by Dries Kreijkam in late 70'). These experimental houses are examples of contrast between form and function. The apartments were designed as cubes (or spheres) on poles hanging above the ground, which makes them look like funny, retro-futuristic space capsules. A comical effect can also be achieved when the whole building contrasts (by its scale, material or facade composition) with the context. The Hotel Topazz in Vienna (arch. BWM Architekten und Partner) looks funny, because of its dark facade with oval windows, which seem to mock the historical tenement houses in the neighbourhood. Edouard François in his design of the Hotel Fouquet Barrière (designed and built in 2003–2006, Paris) refers in a humorous way to the surroundings. The historical facade of the neighbouring building was literally copied and cast totally in concrete, including such details as balustrades, roofs, windows and framing. The super-modern windows in the form of TV screens were put into this copy of the historical facade. The location of the new windows is connected with the plan of the building, but not with the historical facade. That is why the windows appear on the facade in random places totally ignoring the detailing. This is an example of contrast between the new and the old within one facade.

Another idea of how to make architecture funny is reinterpreting well known motifs, but using them in a new, different way. As an example it is worth mentioning the Vitrahaus building designed by Herzog and De Meuron, which plays with the archetypical form of a house with a sloped roof. The architect multiplies the houses, turns them around, and puts one onto another to create a dynamic form. MVRDV makes fun of a typical house in the Balancing Barn, by covering it with a strange material and balancing it on the edge of the hill; in the design for Didden Village, a house with a sloped roof painted bright blue was put on the roof of a brick city building in Rotterdam (Ill. 2); and in the Hagen Island houses in Ypenburg a simple shaped house was multiplied in its simplistic form but in a variety of materials, which

cover the entire buildings from the walls to the rooftops. Another example of reinterpretation is the Team Disney building designed by Michael Graves. This time the reinterpreting motif were caryatids, which in this case are shaped as Disney cartoon characters.

Sometimes the humorous effect can be achieved by combining illogical elements, which look like errors in the design. Buildings from the end of the renaissance period called mannerism could serve as a good example here. One of the representatives of this style was Giulio Romano, the author of the Palazzo Del Te (built in 1524–1534 in Mantua). In this building we find strange details such as triglyphs of the frieze, which seem to be falling down, or fake windows. Whereas in the Casa Berlani (arch. Giovanii Battista Bertani, 1535) we come across pilasters, which end suddenly in the middle of the floor. In this group we can also include buildings which seem to deny the laws of physics, and give an impression of instability, falling apart, or falling down. Examples are the Ufa Cinema building in Dresden (Coop Himmelb(l)au), or the crumpled, almost destroyed solids of the Walt Disney Concert Hall by Frank O. Gehry.

A joke can also be play with the scale of the objects – enlarging or reducing the size of the building or part of it as in the case of model of the Capitol (by Robert Venturi) in Washington, which is located in such a way that an observer can see the model and the real Capitol at the same time. In the Zollverein School of Management & Design building (arch. SANAA) the rescaled windows sized and placed randomly on the facade make it impossible to understand the scale of the building, the number of floors, and its heights. The building becomes less of a building and more of a sculpture. Another example is the building-installation raised for EXPO 1958. It was designed by engineer André Waterkeyn in the form of an iron crystal magnified 165 million times. Enlarging the model of the iron crystal into the scale of a building creates an amazing effect.

Using literal forms taken from the surroundings in architecture can also cause comical effect. A famous example of this is the parking lot building in Los Angeles, designed by Frank O. Gehry, with an entrance in a form of a pair of binoculars. This is not only funny but also quite surreal. The binoculars themselves are a sculpture designed by a pair of artists, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Brugge, who are specialists in designing sculptures of oversized everyday objects. Another literal inspiration is the facade of an unrealized office building Alphabet Building Info by MVRDV. In this building, the windows were designed as the shapes of alphabet letters. Two letters were intentionally omitted – "I" and "Q", because as the architects said, they were already inside the building [8], which makes the idea of the facade even more funny. A different building by the same author, the Teletech Campus, has an ornamented facade made entirely of QR code, which when read by smart-phone leads to the web page of MVRDV.

BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group, Denmark) is a master of making jokes in architecture. Often the whole process of designing in their projects is funny. One example could be the story of the Danish pavilion for EXPO 2010 in Shanghai. The pavilion was built around the famous mermaid from Copenhagen (Ill. 3), who, for the period of the exhibition, was transported to China, because she also wants to travel and in the capital of Denmark the only people who visit the mermaid are the Chinese tourists [4, p. 41]. Another funny story is a building which is an incineration plant and artificial ski slope at the same time. After the waste is burnt the building blows O-rings! These examples show that BIG has a playful attitude towards their designs and architecture. Bjarke Ingels himself says about boring buildings: "...architecture became like a container space, (...) like a boring box with a basement full of machinery to make it inhabitable, as a result, buildings (...) started to look identical all over the planet." [7]

1

2

3

4

Ill. 1. Kubuswoningen – cubic houses (photo Anna Szczegielniak, 2007)
Ill. 2. Didden Village – blue oasis surrounded by brick buildings (photo Anna Szczegielniak, 2008)
Ill. 3. Interior of Danish pavilion for EXPO 2010 (photo http://big.dk/#projects-xpo)
Ill. 4. Garden of Bomarzo – entrance formed as a monster's mouth (photo http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bomarzo_Monster.jpg)

3. Why be funny?

There are many ways to amuse in architecture and architects do so quite often. The question is why they do this? Why do architects try to make us laugh and what can we gain by joking in architecture?

Architecture can make us smile, which is always a good thing. A funny building will be more easily remembered, people want to visit it again and will share what they have seen with others. This can be good in the case of commercial buildings, such as hotels (Hotel Topazz, Hotel Fouquet Barrière) or cinemas (Ufa Cinema).

Humour in architecture can draw our attention to a particular architectural or urban problem. Didden Village raises the issue of extending existing buildings in intensively built-up city centres. The Teller de Arquitectura social housing in Paris, designed by Ricardo Bofill, looks like a palace – it has huge glass columns, and a big courtyard with windows decorated with rich ornaments. Social housing which in principle should be cheap and efficient was designed in a form that is associated with splendour and wealth. The idea was probably social ennoblement, improvement of the quality of the space for the poorer part of the city, breaking with the association with slum architecture and avoiding the division between the architecture for poor and for rich.

A joke in architecture can also be a play with convention and with well-known ideas, their reinterpretation or parody. Postmodern architecture depended on the preferences and mood of the architect, and made jokes from worn out motifs or broken rules (e.g. the abovementioned Disney characters as caryatids). These kind of jokes are caused by boredom with architecture which copies well known patterns and rules (e.g. the reaction of mannerist architects to renaissance architecture referring to classical) and by boredom with strict functionalism (e.g. the reaction of postmodern architects to the simplicity and absence of detail in modernistic architecture). By negating the known rules architects are trying to discover new ways of development.

The playful character of architecture can be used to reflect the character of the building and its function. Buildings such as entertainment centres, cinemas, amusement parks or even kindergartens and schools are designed partially or fully to amuse and entertain. Why then shouldn't they look amusing themselves? As examples of such situation the colourful building of the Zandvoort Circus Amusement Park designed by Soeters Van Eldonk Architecten or the deconstructive Cinema Ufa in Dresden could serve.

Finally the joke in architecture can be simply used for fun and pleasure. After all, both architects and users of the buildings are just ordinary people who like to have fun sometimes. Architect Pier Francesco Orsini, who is the designer of the Bomarzo Gardens of Monsters seems to understand this very well. His main purpose was to amaze the visitor. The garden is full of strange, oversized monsters – elephants, werewolves etc. Common objects were treated in a funny way, e.g. the entrance is shaped as a monster's mouth (Ill. 4). The figures in the garden appear as if they were placed accidentally. The lack of symmetry or other logical composition makes the visitor uncertain of what they will see next during their walk in the park.

4. Summary

Based on the abovementioned examples there are many ways of creating humorous architecture. The reasons why architects use jokes as a means of expression in architecture are very different. The point is not to make people laugh, but smile. Architecture should force us to think about why the building looks a certain way and should force reflection on the architect's intentions. The essence of joking in architecture is the clarity of the message. To find a joke funny, one first needs to understand it. Different things can be funny for architects or builders, different things amuse people who know less about architecture. Even among

people with the same background and education the same things can be perceived differently. It all depends on the individual sense of humour. Additionally, jokes can be good or bad. It is important not to cross the line of good taste, literality or not to tell the same joke over and over again.

Łukasz Wojciechowski in his article "Laugher through tears" published in the magazine ARCH#24 writes "Joking in architecture is a risky issue. The building exists for decades and a good joke can be funny just a few times" [3, p. 72]. However, I do not agree with him. There is a risk in using jokes in architecture, but sometimes it is worth trying. The effect could be an intriguing building, which we will remember for longer.

References

[1] Jodidio, P., *Nowe formy – Architektura lat dziewięćdziesiątych XX wieku*, MUZA SA, Warszawa 1998.

[2] Meyhöfer, D., *Contemporary European Architects 2*, Benedikt Tachen, 1994.

[3] Wojciechowski, Ł., *(Nie)pokoje część XIII: Śmiech przez łzy*, ARCH 24, lipiec/sierpień 2014, p. 72–74.

[4] *Yes Is More: An Archicomic on Architectural Evolution,* Published by BIG A/S on the occasion of the YES IS MORE exhibition – Close up: BIG at Danish Architecture Center in Copenhagen, Evergreen, 2010.

[5] www.big.dk

[6] www.coop-himmelblau.at

[7] http://www.dezeen.com/2015/05/26/bjarke-ingels-in-our-time-lecture-metropolitan-museum-new-york-new-vernacular-architecture/

[8] www.mvrdv.nl